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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 001515

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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI SPY SHOW FALLOUT CONTINUES

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Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Fallout associated with a December 14 Azerbaijani television 'special program' in which several Azerbaijani nationals confessed to spying for Iran and having connections with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) continues (reftel). While the Iranian Embassy in Baku has denied that Iran demanded a formal apology, the Iranian government did demand that the Government of Azerbaijan (GOAJ) turn over all proof associated with what the Iranian government has called a "comedy orchestrated by Israel and the U.S. to hinder Azerbaijan and Iran from developing ties with each other." Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesman Khazar Ibrahim confirmed press reports that Iran's ambassador to Baku was summoned to the Foreign Ministry on December 19 to receive additional details surrounding this case, with Azerbaijani Deputy Foreign Minister (DFM) Sadiqov reportedly requesting an official response to these claims from the Iranian Foreign Ministry. While most Azerbaijani political analysts take seriously the government's account that Iran actively supports subversive activities in the country, some have hinted that the GOAJ may be playing up this threat for a Western audience. End Summary.

Iranian Reaction Continues

¶2. (C) Iran continues to react angrily to a December 14 Azerbaijani television broadcast which provided details about a group of fifteen Azerbaijani nationals calling themselves the "Mahdi Army Group," convicted on December 10 by the Azerbaijani Serious Crimes Court of plotting to overthrow the government. While the Iranian Embassy in Baku has denied that Iran demanded a formal apology, the Iranian government did demand that the GOAJ turn over all proof associated with what the Iranian government has deemed a "comedy orchestrated by Israel and the U.S. to hinder Azerbaijan and Iran from developing ties with each other." Azerbaijani MFA spokesman Khazar Ibrahim confirmed December 19 press reports that Iranian Ambassador Hamidi-Zare was summoned to the Foreign Ministry on December 19 to meet with Deputy Foreign Minister Sadiqov, who provided him with additional details surrounding this case and requested an official response. In December 19 press comments, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Mammadyarov said that the GOAJ had provided "all available facts" to the Iranian government, "and was now awaiting a reply." (Comment: Ambassador Derse will meet with Foreign Minister Mammadyarov December 19 on this and other issues.)

13. (C) Based on anecdotal evidence, most Azerbaijani political analysts take seriously the GOAJ's report of this incident and the notion that Iran actively supports subversive activities in the country. Well-regarded political commentator Rasim Musabayov and opposition Member of Parliament Nasib Nasibli fall squarely into this camp. Musabayov told us that he believes the GOAJ's claims and Nasibli suggested that "Azerbaijan had nothing to explain to Iran" since this case involved Azerbaijanis being tried and convicted by an Azerbaijani court. Few Azerbaijanis believe that the U.S. or Israel could have been behind this incident, with commentator Elchin Qambarov publicly ruling out U.S. or Israeli involvement in an Azadliq opposition newspaper article. While some political commentators including Zardusht Alizade have suggested that the GOAJ may be playing up the threat for a Western audience, few Azerbaijanis doubt that Iran is, in fact, actively engaged in active subversion efforts.

Azerbaijani Media Reaction

14. (U) Official newspapers have generally avoided commenting on the incident altogether. Independent and opposition media outlets, however, appear to have taken a common stance, highly critical of Iran's reaction to the exposure of Iranian-supported extremists by the Ministry of National Security in Azerbaijan. Independent Ayna newspaper wrote on December 18 "If the Tehran government does not have a hand in this deal, it would have denied it with a protest note." Independent Ekho newspaper also highlighted the fact that the Azerbaijani Ambassador, summoned to the Iranian Foreign Ministry, was not presented an official note. "No one would dare to blame a foreign state without having undeniable arguments. If the National Security Ministry issues such a

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statement, it means that it has irrefutable facts that support its claim," wrote opposition Yeni Musavat newspaper quoting opposition Musavat Party activist Qabil Huseynli.

Comment

15. (C) While Iran has backed down on its initial demand that Azerbaijan apologize for what transpired (subsequently insisting that Azerbaijan turn over evidence surrounding the case), the Azerbaijani government - backed by what seems to be a majority of Azerbaijani public opinion - has stood steadfast through the barrage of conspiratorial attacks in the Iranian press. If this incident follows the course of previous flare-ups in the Azerbaijani-Iranian relationship, the GOAJ, having made its point to its larger and often unpredictable neighbor, will likely be interested in restoring "normalcy" to the relationship as soon as possible.
DERSE